

Church exerted its influence—and its influence was ubiquitous—anything approaching independent thought, the free exercise of the intellect in regard to theological dogma, ecclesiastical authority, was suicidal.

How could it be otherwise in such an age? It was the age of obscurantism in things of the mind, the age of visions and miracles of saints, of the fighting bishop and abbot who could wield a sword, but could hardly read the alphabet, of lazy monks who lived on the fat of the land in ignorance and vice, of quibbling pedants in the schools who wasted their ingenuity on the discussion of such a mighty question as how many angels could stand on the point of a needle, of crusading hordes who mistook a holy war to recover the sepulchre of Christ and secure shiploads of relics of the true cross and other holy rubbish, for the real warfare of loving one's neighbour and attaining to the higher Christian morality. It had indeed its great conceptions, its soaring aspirations, as its mighty temples of stone show; its feeling for humanity, its sense of duty, as the better aspects of Christian chivalry remind us; its fits of real devotion, as the self-sacrifice of a St Francis in the service of the miserable testifies. But the greatness of its Gothic architecture exhausted its intellectual greatness, and its Knights Templars and its Franciscans at their best were not the exponents of the spirit of the age. It was in general an age of unenlightenment. The modern spirit of liberty of thought and conscience could not have breathed freely, if at all, in that murky atmosphere of priestly intolerance, crass superstition, puerile pedantry. For those who rose above that murky atmosphere into the ethereal current of spiritual freedom, the world was a veritable purgatory, a world of torture and misery, a world of sorrow, barrenness, and death. What men thought of that world of theirs we learn from Dante, and Dante sends pope and priest to the deepest inferno to expiate their misdeeds. Much that we count great, much that we hold dear, pope and priest degraded and blasted. The world was a desert. Its beauties, its charms, were snares. The predominant spiritual conception of life was that of the monk, and the monk was too often an ignoramus, or a fanatic, or both.

The Church, unfortunately, after the fall of the Roman